

Senate OKs base water investigation

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A Senate amendment that passed Thursday may force the National Academy of Sciences to thoroughly investigate Camp Lejeune's past water contamination and report their findings back to Congress.

For the far-flung community of people who claim to have been made ill by bad base water, that unanimous vote spells relief at last.

"I think I literally screamed (when I found out)," said Terry Dyer, whose group "The Stand" has been fighting for six years through bureaucratic sludge for answers. "It's like something good has finally started coming out of this thing."

It took just one vote on the Senate floor Thursday. But that simple parliamentary procedure may have Dyer and others closer to their goal — an acknowledgement that bad water aboard the base made them sick and that the government will do something to help them — than they've been before.

When the 2007 Defense Appropriations Bill unanimously passed the Senate, it carried more than 100 amendments attached to it. One of those addendums, proposed by Sen. Elizabeth Dole, R-N.C., and co-sponsored by Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-VT, calls for the National Academy of Sciences to conduct a "comprehensive review and evaluation" of scientific evidence about the health risks associated with exposure to the cleaning chemicals trichloroethylene (TCE) and tetrachloroethylene (PCE).

Those chemicals seeped into the drinking water aboard Camp Lejeune sometime around the late 1950s and remained there at least until 1985, when the affected wells were capped. PCE and TCE have been linked to a number of birth defects and ailments such as cancer.

The amendment calls for a strict timetable for action. The Academy must begin working, together with the Department of the Navy, on the review within 60 days after the bill is signed into law. The review must be completed, peer reviewed and submitted to the Navy and Congress within 18 months.

The review will include all relevant studies concerning the health effects of these volatile organic compounds, including past and ongoing studies by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, the federal group currently handling the Lejeune contamination case.

The amendment also calls for the commandant of the Marine Corps to authorize mass notification through newspapers, television and the Internet to inform people of the contamination and the possible ill-effects of the tainted water.

Dyer, who lived aboard the base during the period in question and suffers from maladies she attributes to the contaminated water, credits a September trip the water victims took to Washington, D. C., to meet with congressional representatives with the success.

The face-to-face meetings with Dole and Jeffords proved especially fruitful, Dyer said.

"She wanted to hear and listen to each one of our stories," she said. "Her eyes were full, her heart was full. She was shaking her head in disbelief. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She looked at us and said, 'What can I do? What do you need?'"

"(Jeffords) was a very warm caring person. He listened to every one of our stories. He looked at us and said, 'Something is going to happen.'"

Both Dole and Jeffords said in news releases that they hope the action taken will help these families.

"I have heard from constituents and other Marine families whose children have suffered birth defects and even fatal illnesses, and these families believe that their tragedies were caused by water contamination at Camp Lejeune," Dole said. "We must uncover and evaluate the facts about this incident — and I am hopeful that this provision will help those families who are seeking answers."

Jeffords said he was "hopeful that this study will provide the information these families need to answer questions that have lingered for far too long.

"This is the minimum that our government should be doing to address the grievous failure on the part of the Marine Corps to adequately protect its service members and their families," he said.

The amendment still must survive a conference negotiation between Senate and House members and then must be signed into law by President Bush.

Jeff Byron, an Ohio resident who lived in Tarawa Terrace during the early 1980s and has two daughters who have suffered numerous health problems, said he wants this to be the beginning. In the end, he wants medical and other benefits to help his daughters and other people affected by bad water.

"I am very pleased, and I think the creator has smiled upon us," he said.